John Howard Lawson's "The Red Flag at Cherry Lane"

LeRoy Robinson

The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti on August 22, 1927, brought about a change in the character of the New Playwrights Theatre, led by John Howard Lawson. The five Playwright-Directors of the NPT moved, a little, toward a more rebellious political position. They began the second season of their theatre by raising the red flag. In a chapter in his unpublished autobiography called "The Red Flag at Cherry Lane" John Howard Lawson describes the NPT's second season beginning October 19, 1927.

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The New Playwrights rented the Cherry Lane Playhouse to distance themselves from Broadway, commercial theatre.

Immediately, a physical problem confronted them. The Cherry Lane Playhouse was small, and its stage was too small to accomodate the NPT's "New Showmanship" conception of theatre : spectacle and crowd (choral) action. They had to spend several thousand dollars to reconstruct the stage, which still remained too small. The NPT's budget was severely strained.

Paul Sifton's *The Belt,* the second season's first production, directed by Edward Massey, was a drama about workers on the assembly line at Ford Motor Company's Dearborn, Michigan, plant. *The Belt* was "sensational", Lawson says, in its working class theme, showing the lives of industrial workers.

More "radical" than the play itself, however, was the NPT's opening ceremony held the day before opening night. The large cast

of actors and staff members assembled in front of the Cherry Lane Playhouse and watched the raising of the red flag and listened to "a few brave words" about "insurgent theatre".

Lawson says that even if a hammer and sickle had been deployed on the red flag instead of "New Playwrights" the ceremony would not have caused much offense: "The emotions aroused by the Sacco-Vanzetti case did not extend to the whole field of politics, and the relationship between art and politics was blurred".

The radicalism of the New Playwrights was more aesthetic than political. Lawson himself regarded the raising of the red flag as a declaration of theatrical independence. The actors had no strong political consciousness, "no hint of collective spirit", and for them the raising of the red flag was amusing.

Lawson ironically says that if the red flag inspired any rebelliousness it was directed against the leaders of the NPT themselves for paying the actors "starvation wages" and for adding insult to injury by pretending that they were all united in "a fellowship of rebels".

The Belt's first night audience applauded when the assembly line, in operation, moved parts of automobiles across the "miniature" stage and men were shown working under garish lights. When the strike brought the line to a "clanking halt" the audience applauded even more.

The New York drama critics were not antagonistic to the political themes of *The Belt*. They considered the NPT's iconoclasm lay in the use of experimental forms that were amateurish and foolish. The critics were willing to accept a working class theme in drama if it were set within a conventional theatrical framework, Lawson notes.

Lawson himself was "afflicted by obscure feelings of annoyance" about the production of *The Belt.* He was annoyed that John Dos Passos' naturalistic setting "accentuated a kind of flatness in the play and betrayed the deepest theatrical purposes" of the NPT, purposes supposedly anti-naturalistic. He was annoyed by the naturalistic staging.

"Obsessed" with a belief that this "problem" had to be clarified, Lawson called a meeting with Massey and the cast of *The Belt* to engage in "frank analysis" of their production. The NPT, Lawson said, was a cooperative enterprise and it was necessary to create an atmosphere of "collective discussion" that could not exist in the commercial theatre.

The idea sounded "plausible". No one objected to the meeting. But the meeting itself was "an unmitigated disaster". The only person who had anything to say about the production of *The Belt* was Lawson. What Lawson said raised to the surface feelings exposing the lack of fellowship among the members of the group.

Looking back about 40 years, Lawson says he still does not understand his own lack of sensitivity to the relationship between Massey and the actors who adored him. The actors' loyalty was to Massey, an Associate Director, not to the Playwright-Directors of the NPT. Lawson's suggesting a less naturalistic approach to the staging of *The Belt* made Massey "painfully recognize" that his position in the NPT was "equivocal".

Lawson explains why the NPT had not given Massey any "substantial commitment":

> It was not unnatural for the playwrights to give primary place to their own creative will. We had come together for that purpose, and we could see no way to fulfill ourselves unless we directed our own plays and kept sole control

of the theatre. Our fault lay in our inability to organize and in our weakness in building good relations with artists who could have balanced and enriched our work.

The meeting about *The Belt* had negative results. The actors became suspicious of the five Playwright-Directors, especially Lawson. A few months later, when Lawson began the production of his own *The International,* the actors' antagonism toward him was a barrier that he could not overcome: "I had neither the human understanding nor the craftsmanship to give them confidence".

During the run of *The Belt* the prospects of the NPT looked "promising". Two weeks into the run Lawson announced that the NPT now intended to reach a new audience. The NPT was a "workers' theatre," he said, whose ultimate aim was the presentation of "people's plays" done for workers at prices they could afford.

Lawson added that the NPT would not use their stage as a "soapbox" and he denied that the playwights had any partisan political creed. But in Lawson's statement in the New York *Sun* (November 12, 1927) the idea of "New Showmanship" took on "a more social coloration":

> A writer for the stage who doesn't face America industrially is shirking his whole duty as an artist. He can't conceal his lack of contact by handing out a thin knowledge of psychoanalysis and a few notions about love. And if he does his duty as an artist he has got to appeal to the people who constitute his real audience, not the stuffed shirts who come to the theatre for a few hours of mild diversion between dinner and dancing.

The audience that the NPT had was mostly middle-class people. The support of this audience enabled the NPT to transfer *The Belt* to the Provincetown Theatre for a few additional weeks when the time came to begin rehearsals for the second season's second pro-

duction, Playwright-Director Em Jo Basshe's *The Centuries,* which the NPT hoped would attract workers to their theatre.

The Centuries was "a sprawling inspired history of New York's Jewish ghetto" in the early years of the 20th century. The action takes place on a street of the ghetto. New immigrants arrive. The Triangle Fire casts its flames across the scene. There is a strike of women sweatshop workers.

The New Playwrights appealed to labor unions and other labor organizations to attend this play. A few left-wing groups came--and found the "poetic fervor" of *The Centuries* and its living newspaper technique puzzling: "The qualities that made *The Centuries* important as a theatre experiment were mystifying to garment workers as well as to stuffed shirts", Lawson says. "Both had the same conventional taste in entertainment".

Lawson calls *The Centuries* "an explosion of genius", but uncertain in conception and "raggedly" directed by Basshe, who was not "a temperate or sophisticated director" but who "conveyed his personal feelings about his Jewish heritage with a force that was almost embarrassing". For Lawson *The Centuries,* "a long lament, a song of love and spiritual hunger" was the "soul" of the NPT. But the drama critics cried out against it.

Lawson then correctly foreaw "a more strident outcry" by the critics against his own *The International,* which "denounced Gomorrah with unbridled fury". The play's world wide setting and its prophecies of future revolutions and wars called on all the resources of all the arts. *The International* was "an almost illegible blueprint of a kind of theatre which did not exist", total theatre--which could not exist on the miniature stage of the Cherry Lane Playhouse. In directing *The International* Lawson "multiplied" all the difficulties, not because of

foolish pride, he says, but because all the conditions, including the play itself, were "impossible".

Lawson's first difficulty was in communicating with the actors. He felt "thwarted". He became "nervous" and "illnatured". He resented the actors' lack of trust in him. The actors resented his lack of skill as a stage director and his abstract talk.

Once after many hours of rehearsal Lawson told the actors to repeat a scene. "Lionel Ferrand, the stage manager, ··· looked at the weary actors ··· deliberately closed the script and left the stage. There was silence as he descended to Lawson in the front row, handed Lawson the script and left." Lawson, angry and frightened, trembled but controlled himself and dismissed the actors.

Lawson later told Ferrand he was aware that Ferrand and the actors considered him incompetent, but Lawson felt that he had to continue as director of *The International.* Lawson admitted that he had driven the actors too hard because he himself was driven by his dream of the value of *The International* and by his inability to realize the play's potentialities. Ferrand agrred to help Lawson, and after that they worked together well, and there was an improvement in the relations between Lawson and the actors.

The International was brought to "some semblance of order" for its opening on January 12, 1928. Nightclub pianist Edward Ziman's music was not subtle, Lawson says (adding "and it was not Stravinsky"), but Ziman understood the spirit of the play. His pounding music sometimes "shattered the nerves" of the audience, but that was Lawson's intention. John Dos Passos' setting fulfilled Lawson's constructivist conception of a waste land symbolizing history, a setting providing an illusion of vast and inhuman space where people moved without knowledge of their fate. Don Oscar Beque's dance movements

were hampered by the inexperienced women dancers and by their costumes that made it difficult for them to follow his choreography. Lawson puts it this way: the combination of many arts was there on the stage but the grand design was not there. "A medley of forms seemed to be competing, often noisily, for attention". The critics said that they had witnessed chaos.

"Yes" Lawson says "I rashly determined to transcend all the limitations of the stage. I tried to create a public drama, a mass drama, within the confines of a stage hardly bigger than a closet. Yet the preview of history that I projected is as valid in the 1960s as was the forecast of scientific progress in *Nirvana*".

In the 1960s, Lawson continues his defense of *The International* at length.

Lawson refers to *The International*'s initial dialogue. Two American international financiers speak: "Now suppose every drop of rain were poison to kill a man ?" Lawson notes this "sentiment" of 1927-28 was echoed in a popular song of the 1960s: "What have they done to the rain ?"

Lawson then quotes again from this opening dialogue between international financiers: "If England forces our hand in the East, if lawless elements make trouble in Mexico and South America, we might be embroiled..." "That's why we must spread, take the map for a garden, cultivate it... Then if war comes our country will be impregnable"..."That's what they say in London, they say it in Berlin and Moscow".

These ideas may have been "exquisitely tiresome" to New York *Journal* drama critic John Anderson, Lawson says, but the ideas are not without interest: "The fact that they were expressed in 1927 is worth consideration" by students of American culture.

The International is the story of a final global war which begins in Tibet and spreads to China. The Soviet Union sends troops to support a revolution in China. The conflict spreads around the world. Lawson says he got the idea for this aspect of the play from newspaper headlines in the spring and summer of 1927.

In April 1927 Chiang Kai Shek turned against the Soviet Union and also against the left wing of the Chinese Revolution. He crushed a general strike in Shanghai and began to slaughter his political opponents. The violence threatened foreigners in China. In Nanking several Europeans and an American were killed. The United States, Japan, France and England intervened to support Chiang Kai Shek. American Navy destroyers shelled Nanking. An international occupation army of 40,000 soldiers occupying the international settlement at Shanghai included a regiment of American marines.

"It took no Delphic vision," Lawson says, "to see that these events contained the seeds of future conflict". Lawson ended the second act of *The International* with the decision of the Soviet Union to support the Chinese Revolution: "We throw our strength to the East, we defend China against greedy world militarism". But *The International* is not a pro-Soviet drama: The Russian Commissar who speaks about "greedy world militarism" is an unsympathetic figure, and the play shows Soviet policy as aggressive and unintelligent.

The heroine of the play, a professional revolutionary, is first seen receiving orders from the Commissar. But she is not Russian. Her nationality is not identified. She believes in the Revolution. At the end of the play, she and her American lover die in New York as that city is destroyed by enemy airplanes. "Love is their only solace".

The International's pessimism and sentiment "relect the viewpoint of the middleclass intellectual who sees history in terms of an impending cataclysm", Lawson says. Lawson identified himself in 1927 with the American lover, David, who rebels against his class, but who sees the Revolution only in the "radiant presence" of a woman and who dies proclaiming that love is all that matters.

The "saving grace" of *The International,* Lawson says, is its irony and invention. Lawson describes the play's scenes set in an international brothel, the chorus, wearing obscene wallpaper costumes, dancing before a huge gold bed, as a beautiful half-naked black woman writhes in sexual abandon and abruptly throws herself on the gold bed, sobbing: "Jesus, how it hurts..." These "rhapsodies", as Lawson calls them, were performed with an abandon that shocked everyone.

Lawson says that *The International* was "a triumph of alienation"--almost no one had a good word to say for it. Politically it was attacked from the right and from the left.

Sender Garlin, drama critic for the Communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker,* denounced *The International* for its "intellectual confusion". (January 16, 1928) John Dos Passos wrote a letter to the *Worker* in defense of the play as "a very personal and subjective outburst expressing one man's feelings under the impact of our world today... a broad cartoon of the dynamics of current history. Because it is the first time this has been done on the American stage everybody comes out flustered and starts cursing the play out for not being 'realistic' or a number of things that it never intended or wanted to be". (January 20, 1928)

Sender Garlin immediately published a long answer to Dos Passos. (January 21, 1928) Garlin ignored aesthetic matters. He stated that *The International* was based on "misconception of the world revolution and of the key figures who dominate its operations". John Dos Passos soon responded to this, (January 28, 1928) Dos Passos ignored Garlin's political assertions. He had objected to Garlin's comments, he said, not because they questioned the value of the play but because they were written from the same point of view as those comments in the capitalist newspapers, the angle of contemporary Broadway "realism".

About 40 years after this controversy, Lawson says:

"I find it of more than passing interest that the question of realism--the great question concerning the art of the theatre and the whole range of creative experience--was posed so urgently in discussion on the Left. I argued the matter at length with Joseph Freeman, who was then the editor of the *New Masses.* Freeman came to the theatre to chide me for my political errors. We talked at cross purposes. I spoke of the need to break the mold of bourgeois forms and sterile emotions, and Freeman answered with an analysis of the world situation. I listened carefully, but, even in political terms, I could not accept his formulations. I believed my vision of doom was nearer to reality than his faith in the triumph of 'the masses' ".

Even before the opening of Michael Gold's *Hoboken Blues,* the fourth play of the NPT's second season, the group's finances were shaky, but Edward Faragoh's careful management enabled them to produce it.

Lawson describes *Hoboken Blues* as a "musical carnival" of life in Harlem: in their rat-infested tenement flats, the poor Negro residents of the black ghetto dream of a mystical land, "a place beyond all the world's rivers, where the heart's wishes are fulfilled".

Edward Massey directed *Hoboken Blues* with "verve". The play was a "circus" performed in the aisles: clowns gave out lollipops to people in the audience. This latest example of the NPT's "New Showmanship" caused the New York drama critics "embarrassment", Lawson says, and caused them to jeer.

As the end of the run of *Hoboken Blues* came close, Em Jo Basshe outlined the NPT's plans for a third season to financier Otto Kahn. Basshe "expressed his faith eloquently" about "the most experimental theatre in New York, a theatre pledged to be a stronghold of liberal and radical opinion, a theatre which maintains contact with those social forces which are the driving power of our time". Kahn "applauded" but he did not promise to give any more money to the NPT.

Under Basshe the NPT produced two more plays and then went out of existence. At the end of the second season, the Playwright-Directors had suffered personal dejection. Except Basshe all of them recoghized the "bleak fact" that their theatre had no future. Its failure created a "vacuum" for them.

Lawson thinks (in the mid 1960s) that John Dos Passos and Michael Gold were less directly hurt by the failure of the NPT than the other three Playwright-Directors because their main interest was

not the theatre. Yet Lawson "suspects" that Dos Passos and Gold were more shaken than the others by the NPT's failure, and more angered, "because in their different ways they resented the tough economic and personal problems in the day-to-day work of the theatre and thought there was a comparatively simple 'revolutionary' course".

In March 1928 Gold became the editor of the *New Masses.* Shortly after that, Dos Passos went to the Soviet Union "to get away from the personal problems of the NPT as well as to get a close look at the Russian theatre", e. g., the theatre of Meyerhold. Dos Passos found that Meyerhold and other avant garde directors were under political attack. In August 1928 Lawson took a job in Hollywood and his association with the NPT practically ended. Soon after, Farragoh also went to Hollywood.

Em Jo Basshe refused to accept the negative feelings of the other Playwright-Directors and tried to keep the NPT in existence. "He felt the NPT was his salvation and its death would be like his own".

Lawson thinks that John Dos Passos was more seriously affected by the breakdown of the NPT than by almost any other of his experiences during those "crucial" years. "It began a process of disillusionment which prepared for his disillusionment with the Soviet Union. He came back to the United States with a different viewpoint. It was a subtle change but it had vital consequences".

Perhaps, Lawson says, the New Playwrights suffered a "psychic wound". In his case, he adds, the pain may have been salutary: "It was my introduction to *praxis,* to the world of action, involving an understanding of other people and the discipline of cooperation".

In Hollywood, Lawson received an "incoherent" letter from Basshe, who was preparing *Singing Jailbirds* for a December produc-

tion at the Provincetown Theatre. Lawson interprets Basshe's staccato phrasing in this letter as suggesting Basshe's desperation. After *Singing Jailbirds* opened under Basshe's direction and played 79 performances, Basshe wrote Lawson asking about his chances of getting a job in Hollywood, too.

Lawson here writes in detail about an argument between Basshe and Dos Passos.

> Basshe now had a "violent" dispute with John Dos Passos. Dos Passos wanted Edward Massey to direct Dos Passos' play *Airways Inc.* for which Dos Passos had designed his own settings. *Airways Inc.* opened at the Grove Street Theatre in February 1928. Basshe considered Massey's direction inadequate. Dos Passos refused to permit Basshe to interfere with Massey's work. Then Dos Passos resigned from the NPT.
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> In Hollywood, Lawson and Farragoh were "astonished" by the tone of "personal resentment" in Dos Passos' letter of resignation. Dos Passos wrote: "Half the time we have been trying to found an institution and the rest of the time trying to put over ourselves or each other, and occasionally trying to knife each other in the back". (Lawson cites George A. Knox and Herbert M. Stahl's *Dos Passos and* and "The Revolting Playwrights" (1961) for this quotation.)

Lawson says that in 1928 he could not understand this letter form Dos Passos, whose description of the NPT was "disturbingly at odds" with Lawson's own experience. Lawson admits that he had made mistakes, "but Dos Passos seemed to take no account of the difficulties of cooperation and the lessons we had learned from each other".

In 1928 Lawson assumed that Dos Passos was moved to resign from the NPT chiefly by his affection for Edward Massey and his anger at Em Jo Basshe's desire to control the production of *Airways Inc.* In the mid-1960s Lawson sees that Dos Passos "had felt betrayed" and that "his outburst had deep roots" in the history of the NPT

and in his personal history. Dos Passos "had idealized the NPT and wanted its success, not in Broadway terms, but in terms of artistic prestige and comfortable, relaxed relationships".

On April 29, 1929 the New York *Times* announced the end of the NPT. The Proyincetown Theatre was about to terminate its activity. The Neighborhood Playhouse had already gone out of existence. American experimental theatres had a bad time in the late 1920s.

Only the Theatre Guild had a "Golden Era"--between April 1926 and October 1928 the Guild produced 14 plays, all but two of which were financially successful. Among the Guild's "bonanza plays", as Lawson calls them, were *The Silver Cord, The Second Mary, Porgy,* and *Strange Interlude.*

About 40 years after this "Golden Era", Lawson asks: "Did these plays contribute as much to theatre art as the eight plays produced by the NPT, on a stage that was often more crowded than the auditorium?" Lawson says he has to ask this question because it concerns his life and his commitment "today as well as yesterday" to a revolution in the theatre.

Lawson notes that in *The Fervent Years* Harold Clurman, who in the mid-1930s achieved acclaim as the director of the Group Theatre, found "nothing worthy of consideration" in the work of the NPT. Clurman considered the New Playwrights undisciplined, amateurish, lyrical, frivolous, confused. Lawson says: "Confused or not, there are conflicting movements in the theatre, and the clash and interaction of these movents shape the life of every artist".

Lawson says that Clurman had followed the Stanislavsky method, "basically a means of creating a real illusion through the emotional identification of the actors with the parts they are playing".

Lawson had had a different view. The difference was so "fundamental", Lawson says, that it "colored" all his future relationships with Clurman and the Group Theatre, which produced Lawson's *Success Story* in 1932.

The New Playwrights, Lawson continues, were not frivolous. Their idea of a non-naturalistic theatre was not ephemeral: "It has survived". Lawson adds: "Few students of the drama would be rash enough to claim that the psychological naturalism of the contemporary theatre is the main tendency of the theatre of the 1960s".

The revolt against naturalism in the theatre became an international movement in the 1920s. "The only theatre in the United States which proclaimed the revolt was the New Playwrights Theatre", Lawson says.

Lawson compares the NPT with European theatres of the 1920s:

The activity of the NPT, Lawson says, paralleled the work of Meyerhold in Moscow and that of Piscator and Brecht in Berlin. There was communication between these people and the NPT, an exchange of ideas. In some cases, they were interested in the same plays. "The chronological development of the NPT's themes," Lawson writes, "has its closest affinity to the rough similarity in our social situations, though Piscator and Brecht enjoyed wider support and a more socially conscious audience". Lawson notes that in 1927 Piscator's work at the Volksbuehen entered a new phase with the production of Ernst Toller's *Hoppla! Wir Leben*--"a more brutal critique of bourgeois society and a more spectacular expansion of theatrical techniques then anything Piscator had previously attempted".

Lawson considers the "framework of ideas" in *Hoppla ! Wir Leben* "astonishingly close" to the viewpoint of his own *Loud Speaker* and *The International*--"the stress on madness and irrationality, the moments of introspection and sentiment, The overwhelming presence of history". "The fear of war that shadows *The International*" Lawson finds "astringently expressed" in Piscator's production of *The Good Soldier Schweik.* Piscator suggested the chaos of World War I by staging

the whole action of the play on a double treadmill, "contrasting the experience of the common soldier with the mad motion of troops and machines and propaganda and death". Piscator's *Schweik* was successful, but, being accused of substituting propaganda for art in the theatre, Piscator ran into difficulties similar to those of the NPT.

In 1927 Brecht worked with Piscator. In 1928 Brecht presented his *The Three-Penny Opera.* Lawson says that in this play Brecht deals with material similar to that which the NPT were struggling to master, but Brecht, in contrast to them, "had alreaby attained elements of an integrated style". Lawson says: "The further growth of Brecht's art was to be an arduous process accompanied by hardships which may have deepened his creative consciousness".

Piscator was forced to abandon his theatre at the time of the failure of the NPT. In an article in *New Masses,* Piscator discussed his failure. He believed he had achieved results which may have been important in the history of the theatre, even important politically, and which were achieved in the midst of tremendous difficulties both human and material. This article was prefaced by an editorial note saying that Piscator's piece was of special interest "in view of the closing of the New Playwrights Theatre" which failed for "exactly the same reason".

Lawson follows up this idea of the *New Masses.* It is a moot question, he says, whether the NPT made an important contribution to theatre history, more especially to the theatre in the United States. The eight plays produced by the NPT were "of varying merit; their imporfections were accentuated by imperfect staging". But, Lawson points out, the production of eight original plays by contemporary American playwrights within three seasons is in itself "a rare accomplisment".

Lawson continues his defense of the NPT: "If art is a matter of discovery, a revelation of new areas of sensibility or experience, these eight works were true explorations, attacking themes which were to a large extent unknown to the theatre". These eight plays

of the NPT asked people to look at aspects of American life that had been neglected in the American theatre or had been observed through rose-colored glasses, Lawson says.

Other plays about labor had been produced, notably Lawson's own *Processional.* "But", Lawson says, "the struggle of labor had never been presented with the documentary honesty of *The Belt* or the revolutionary partisanship of *Singing Jailbirds.* There was growing interest in Negro themes, but no one had entered into the life of a Southern community as Basshe did in *Earth,* and no one had approached Harlem with the love and compassion that Gold brought to *Hoboken Blues.*"

Lawson continues: "*Loud Speaker* introduced a novel approach to political satire". The "grotesqueries" of *The International* link "the sweep of history and the premonitions of wars and revolutions with the world we now live in". In *Airways Inc.* Dos Passos depicted the "decline and desperation of the middle-class in terms that foretold the mood of the depression".

In the arts, Lawson says, causes and effects "are woven of a thousand half-hidden threads". "Everything the artist thinks and does is the product of everything in his life and all the lives and forms with which he has come in contact". Basshe's *The Centuries* had an influence on dramatic thought, Lawson "suspects". In any case, *The Centuries* affected Lawson deeply; it was "directly responsible" for Lawson's writing *Success Story* about a Jewist businessman who "betrayed" his heritage. *Success Story* exerted a "tangible" influence on the Group Theatre and "more intimately" on playwright Clifford Odets. Lawson adds: "I have no measuring rod by which to gauge my debt / to *The Centuries* / or the more intricate obligation which makes Odets' language in *Awake and Sing !* derivative (through *Success Story*)

from the lyric cadences of *The Centuries*".

In continuing his defense of the NPT, Lawson says that in all of their productions, especially in *The Centuries,* techniques which were "to flower" in the theatre of the next decade were "tested and defended" for the first time in the United States: "The tenement house fire in *One Third of a Nation* (1938) is an exact replica of the sweat shop fire in *The Centuries*".

This similarity does not mean that Arthur Arent or the theatre people involved in the production of his *One Third of a Nation* were conscious of any debt to *The Centuries,* Lawson cautions: "The extraordinary thing is that artists and critics were wholly unconscious of the interplay of ideas, the battle of methods and theories, that entered into the form of each work".

Here Lawson refers to Elmer Rice, "one of the most scrupulous and open-minded men" that he had ever known: "It is unthinkable that Elmer Rice would ignore any part of the truth as he recalls it". Lawson then mentions the living newspaper play *Ethiopia* (1936): "*Ethiopia* is a fragment of history, a document and a judgment. The style is Brechtian and Epic". This style, Lawson says, "goes back to the New Playwrights". Yet in *The Living Theatre* (1959) Elmer Rice mentions the NPT only once: "It [Lawson quotes] attracted little attention and had no discernible influence either upon the drama or upon upon the theatre".

Lawson says that in the late 1920s Elmer Rice was actually interested in the NPT. During the NPT's first season Lawson corresponded with Rice (who was in Europe at the time) about the possibility of the NPT's producing Rice's *The Subway.* Late in 1927 Rice returned to the United States, during the NPT production of *The Centuries.* Shortly after *The Centuries* closed, Rice began writing *Street*

Scene, based on an earlier play of his, *The Sidewalks of New York,* in one scene of which there was shown a street in front of a brownstone house. "It seems interesting to me," Lawson says, "that Rice decided to expand this idea and to make the street the setting of an entire play at a time when a play The Centuries making imaginative use of a similar setting had recently concluded its run".

Lawson sees a closer connection, "which may also involve no conscious imitation", between his *Loud Speaker* and Kaufman and Ryskind's *Of Thee I Sing* (1932), hailed as a new type of musical farce. Lawson says that *Of Thee I Sing* uses devices and modes of dialogue derived from *Loud Speaker* as well as from *Roger Bloomer* and *Processional.* These techniques had come into "fairly common usage" by 1932 especially in musical comedies. Lawson himself had learned a great deal from the makers of musical comedy, so, he says, "it was not unreasonable that they should learn something from me".

Lawson admits that his two years with the NPT left him with "painful scars". But he was brought closer to knowledge of himself and of his place in the world. "It was painful," he concludes, "in that it broke the cage of my isolation, and the cage was my defense".